



Crime, (counter-)insurgency and the privatization of security – the case of Medellín, Colombia

Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Ana María Jaramillo

Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín is a researcher at the Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Relaciones Internacionales – Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

Address: Carrera 7 no. 83-36 Apartamento 202 Bogota-Colombia

Ana María Jaramillo is a researcher at the Corporación Region – Medellín.

Address: Calle 55 no. 41-10, Medellín, Colombia

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1. Hobsbawm, Eric (1988), "Los partidos obreros en las grandes ciudades", *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* No 3, September, pages 21–36.

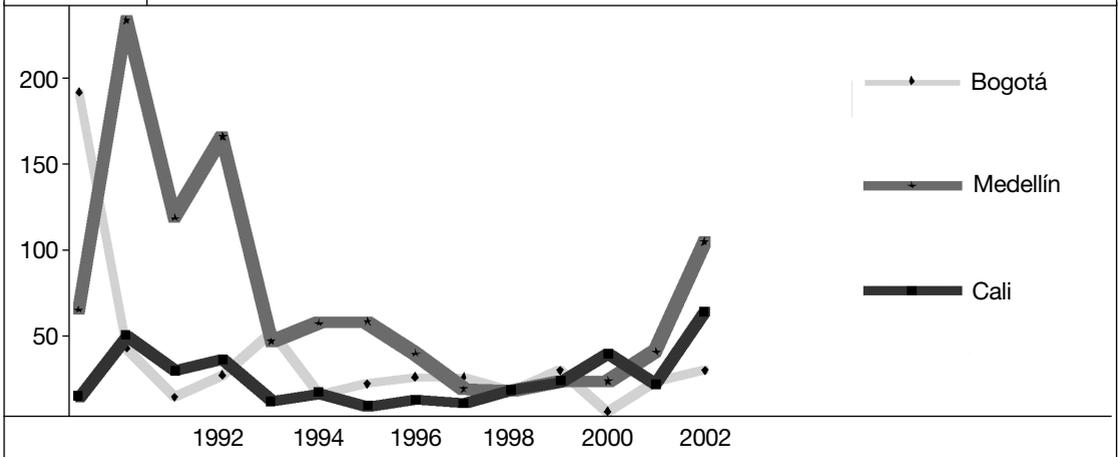
SUMMARY: *This paper describes and explains the very high and sustained levels of violence in Medellín, Colombia, over the last 20 years. Even within the turbulent context of Colombia, Medellín has experienced unusually severe violence, and several peace processes undertaken within the city have failed to provide more than temporary relief. The paper argues that this state of affairs has been the product of a "politicization of crime" in the city, a phenomenon that has been linked to global markets and a breakdown in the state's provision of security. This failure of state provision created the opportunity for various insurgent and counter-insurgent forces to provide security themselves, thereby maintaining an uneasy truce with the authorities, commanding the allegiance of local communities, and establishing an urban base for their activities.*

I. INTRODUCTION

MEDELLÍN – COLOMBIA'S SECOND city from both the demographic and economic points of view – has registered extremely high levels of lethal violence in the last 20 years (Figures 1 and 2). Other Colombian cities have also been affected by high homicide rates, but only in Medellín can three characteristics be found simultaneously. First, the level of violence is very high; second, it is sustained despite fluctuations in homicide rates; and third, violence is interspersed with frequent urban peace processes.

This paper combines a narrative and an explanation. The narrative describes the experience of war-waging and peace-making in the city since the early 1980s. The explanation consists of answers to two interrelated questions. First, why has Medellín been so violent, and why did (counter-)insurgent projects take off there? The metropolis seems not to be an insurgency-friendly environment.⁽¹⁾ Given territorial and social factors, urban guerrillas are easy to repress. Indeed, in Latin America, they have been quite unsuccessful. One possible answer is that Medellín only follows a Colombian trend, aggravated by idiosyncratic factors. Colombia has long been in the midst of internal conflict and, in the late 1980s, it became the main coca exporter to the United States. And it is well known that Medellín was the epicentre of the eponymous cartel. But Medellín still represents an extreme, even within the turbulent context of Colombia. In other Colombian cities – notably Cali – where large-scale criminality also thrived, the dynamics of political homicide were quite different, and rates were significantly lower. Furthermore, the continuous presence of armed political groupings in

Figure 1: Lethal political violence: total number of deaths from combat and political homicide in Colombia's three main cities, 1985-2002



SOURCE: IEPRI database of political lethal violence, organized by Francisco Gutiérrez and Research Group in the course of the project "War, Democracy and Globalization".

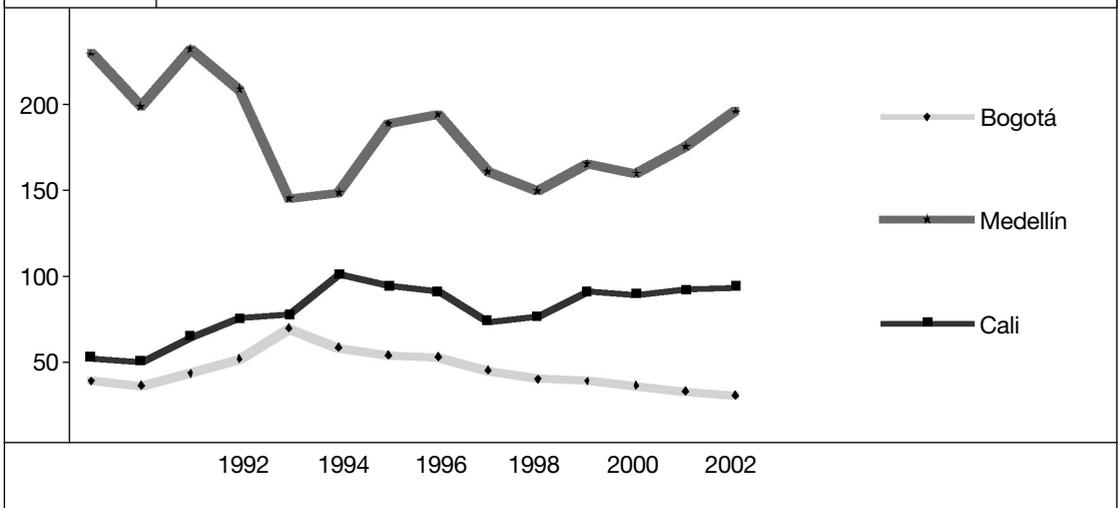
Medellín cannot be explained simply in terms of the absence of the state. However "absence of the state" is defined and understood, it would appear that in Medellín (second only to the capital, Bogotá), the state and modern capitalism are, if anything, more visible. Nor does extreme inequality appear to be a factor separating the city from others, or from the rest of the country.⁽²⁾ Why, then, Medellín?

The second question is why the several peace processes set in motion in the city have been unable to forge a durable peace. It might be thought that, while waging a civil war, the Colombian state has been inclined only to repressive solutions. This is not the case. Municipal and national authorities have lacked neither repressive ("hawkish") nor pacifist ("doveish") objectives and programmes. Their repertoire has always been broad and flexible, following a long Colombian tradition.⁽³⁾ Why has it been relatively unsuccessful?

We will argue here that the key factor that characterizes Medellín's trajectory is a tight link between "political" and "criminal" violence – the politicization of crime – which is the product of both "structural" factors and the decisions of relevant actors at crucial junctures. This link has two consequences. On the one hand, it brings to the fore the problem of security and the state. The politicization of crime flags a breakdown in a basic "dimension of political order" – the monopoly over the provision of security – that Eckstein⁽⁴⁾ long ago listed as one of the prerequisites for the outbreak of war. Although in several regards the Colombian state is strong and ubiquitous in Medellín, it is also "porous" in the sense that it allows for competitive, parasitic and mutualist relations with other organizations that command means of coercion. These organizations compete with the state, in the sense that they dispute some of its formal monopolies, but at the same time they cooperate with it (mutualism) or take profit from it (parasitism) through a dense web of interactions and tacit or explicit coalitions.

Thus, we suggest that, regarding Medellín, Olson's biblical pessimism, "...in the beginning there was crime"⁽⁵⁾ gets it right. A basic security failure, in various complex ways, fed (counter-)insurgent projects. This is what a series

2. Clearly, inequality may explain proneness to violence at the national level. There is already a huge literature on the subject. See, for example, Krain, Matthew (1998), "Contemporary democracies revisited. Democracy, political violence, and event count models", *Comparative Political Studies* Vol 31, No 2, pages 139-164; also Muller, Edward (1995) "Income inequality and democratization. Reply to Bollen and Jackman", *American Political Science Review* Vol 83, No 2, pages 577-586; Fajnzylber Pablo, Daniel Lederman and Norman Laoyza (1998), "Determinants of crime rates in Latin America and the World. An empirical assessment", the World Bank, at <http://econ.worldbank.org/programs/conflict/topic/12197/library/doc?id=13213>; and Blau, Judith and Peter Blau (1992), "The cost of inequality. Metropolitan structure and violent crime", *American Sociological Review* Vol 47, No 3, pages 117-120. But within the country, it will not discriminate between

Figure 2: Homicide rates in Colombia's three main cities, 1985-2002

SOURCE: Dijín, Policía Nacional.

Medellín and other cities.

3. Gutiérrez, Francisco (1997), "Gestión del conflicto en entornos turbulentos. El caso colombiano", in Barrios, Adriana (editor), *Conflicto y Contexto. Resolución Alternativa de Conflictos y Contexto Social*, TM-SER-Colciencias-Programa de Reinserción, Bogotá, pages 79-118; also Uribe, María Teresa (1997), "La negociación de los conflictos en el ámbito de viejas y nuevas sociabilidades", in Barrios, Adriana (as above), pages 165-182.

4. Eckstein, Harry (1965), "On the etiology of internal wars", *History and Theory* Vol 4, No 2, page 133.

5. Olson, Mancur (1983), "Dictatorship, democracy, and development", *The American Political Science Review* Vol 87, No 3, pages 567-576.

6. Gutiérrez, Francisco and Ana María Jaramillo (2003), "Pactos paradoxais", in de Sousa Santos, Boaventura (editor), *Reconhecer para Libertar*, Civlizacao Brasileira, Rio de Janeiro, pages 249-288.

of peace processes tried to solve. But the settlements of the national or municipal governments with non-state armed agencies have been characterized by what we have termed "paradoxical pactism",⁽⁶⁾ that is, temporary agreements that solve specific problems, but that do not address the general balance of power that underlies these problems. These agreements realistically acknowledged the porosity of the state, but at the same time risked increasing it. Actually, pactism can create new patterns of power – giving incentives to illegal arms holders – that perpetuate ongoing competition among various actors to provide security and, in so doing, command the allegiance of urban communities.

This converges with the description that Tarrow gives of pactism in a wholly different (urban) setting. The institutions of Italian city states, according to him:

"...had the essential character of uneasy pacts...and pacts have the property that they do not produce long term reconciliation between interests; they only mediate them. Pact-like institutions are both susceptible to breaking down under external pressure and to spilling easily into non-institutional contention."⁽⁷⁾

We will suggest here that the politicization of crime, together with the policy used to tackle it, pactism, "attracted" Medellín's trajectory towards high, stable levels of lethal violence, with a particular blend of economic and political rationalities. This blend pre-dates the armed competition for the provision of security, and feeds it. The result is that Medellín is simultaneously one of the most guarded and one of the most insecure cities in the world.⁽⁸⁾

In the next part of this paper, we describe the saga of the (leftist) militias that had their field day in the 1980s and early 1990s. We describe their emergence and evolution, and what led to the peace accords with the government in 1994. The third part deals with the unlucky outcome of the peace agreements, and in the fourth part, we focus on Medellín after the demise of the militias. In accordance with the Aristotelian principle that "nature does not tolerate a vacuum", the city was filled with new forms of criminal-political activity, and the local governments established uneasy

Table 1: Actors involved in paramilitary activity in Medellín	
Name	Description
M-19	Nationalist guerrilla group that appeared in the early 1970s. Between 1982 and 1985, it carried out peace negotiations with the government, which ultimately broke down. However, in 1991, it finally struck a peace agreement and became a political party.
Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)	National Liberation Army, a guerrilla group created in the 1960s under the influence of the Cuban revolution. It is still active.
Marxist-Leninist Party	A revolutionary party, originally of Maoist orientation, which had a guerrilla group.
Juntas de Acción Comunal	Neighbourhood associations, created in Colombia under the influence of the Alliance for Progress, similar to many others in Latin America. They are still the backbone of Colombia's popular associational life.
Pablo García	Main leader of the Milicias del Pueblo para el Pueblo.
Milicias del Pueblo para el Pueblo, or Milicias del Pueblo	The original and main militia organization in Medellín until 1994.
Medellín Cartel	Criminal network that operated in Medellín from the early 1980s to 1993.
Cali Cartel	Criminal network that operated in Medellín from the early 1980s to 1996.
Pablo Escobar	Figurehead of the Medellín Cartel. In the late 1980s, he unleashed a terrorist campaign against the government. The motive was the decision of the government to extradite narco-traffickers to the United States. In June 1991, Escobar surrendered to the judiciary, after the government offered him generous conditions, but he ran away in July 1993. He was killed by the state forces in December 1993.
FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)	The main Colombian guerrilla group. It was created in the 1960s and is still active.
Milicias del Valle de Aburrá – Milicias Independientes del Valle de Aburrá	The Valle de Aburrá is the valley where Medellín is situated. The Milicias del Valle de Aburrá were supported by, but not dependent on, the ELN. The Milicias Independientes are a splinter group of the Milicias del Valle de Aburrá.
Coosercom	Security cooperative that stemmed from the peace accord between the militias and the state. Its members and managers were ex-militia members.
La Terraza	The most powerful <i>oficina</i> to emerge from the re-centralization process of criminal activities in the city after the fragmentation following the death of Pablo Escobar.
Adolfo Paz	At present a paramilitary leader, head of the Bloque Cacique Nutibara (BCN).
Bloque Cacique Nutibara (BCN)	Paramilitary front, the precursor of the peace process between the government and the paramilitary. It dissolved and surrendered part of its military depot in 2004.
Bloque Metro	Another paramilitary front that operated in approximately the same territory as the BCN. It engaged in armed confrontation with the latter and was defeated.
Comandante Doble Cero, or Rodrigo	Commander of the Bloque Metro; he was defeated by the BCN, and then killed, in 2004.
Hammer	Paramilitary commander, reportedly coming from the ELN.
Carlos Castaño	Leader of the paramilitary in the 1990s. In 1997, he was able to create a unified, but short-lived, paramilitary federation. He was probably killed in 2004.

7. Tarrow uses the term "institution" inconsistently, first simply as a pattern of interaction, and then as a set of rules of the game that regulate conflict. See Tarrow, Sidney (2004), "From comparative historical analysis to 'local theory': the Italian city-state route to the modern state", *Theory and Society* Vol 33 No 3-4, pages 443-471.

8. Jaramillo, Ana María, Ramiro Ceballos and Marta Inés Villa (1998), "En la encrucijada. Conflicto y cultura política en el Medellín de los noventa", Alcaldía de Medellín, Programa de Reinserción-Red de Solidaridad Social, Corporación Región, Medellín.

9. In this section, we draw on Gutiérrez and Jaramillo (2003), see reference 6.

compromises. Slowly but surely, however, this heady mix led to the domination of one actor, the paramilitary. Also in Part IV of the paper, we examine the evolution of the paramilitary, and discuss its very tight relations with criminal gangs. In the final section, we discuss briefly the peace process that is currently underway, and compare it with other peace experiences in the city. In the conclusion, we speculate on the relations between urban violence, security, states and markets. Table 1 gives basic information about the actors who feature in the paper.

II. REVOLUTION AND THE PROVISION OF SECURITY: THE GROWTH AND EVOLUTION OF THE MEDELLÍN MILITIAS⁽⁹⁾

THE "HEATING UP" of Medellín in the mid-1970s was preceded by the proliferation of professional hit men (*sicarios*) paid by criminal organizations. In the 1980s, with the boom in drug-trafficking, favourable conditions were created for the interaction of diverse phenomena, namely the appearance and consolidation of gangs in the *barrios*, and corruption in the police and other security agencies. The drugs lords introduced important changes to the organizational and operational strategies of illegal activities, with the use of the most modern weaponry and the capacity to offer practically unlimited bribes to the police, the army and the judges.

It was in this context that the guerrillas first made their appearance in the *barrios*. In its negotiations with the government between 1982 and 1985, a guerrilla group called M-19 created "peace camps", with a strong emphasis on military training. Many of these "camps" gave birth to militias. Despite these harmful side-effects, the "peace camps" showed that the guerrillas could aspire to a more massive presence in the city. Other guerrilla groups had focused their activities in Medellín and other cities on creating military commands for the purposes of attacks, holdups and blackmail, and to support the guerrilla fronts in the rural areas. In their scheme, the city was militarily subordinate to the countryside – and thus, even if they generally failed to recognize it, politically subordinate. This orthodox strategy started to be called into question by militants and sympathizers of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and of the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party, who argued for a much broader strategy of military and political work in the *barrios*.

The militias themselves originated in the Barrio Popular # 1, in the north-eastern part of Medellín. Barrio Popular # 1 is a mix of lower-middle-class and lower-class neighbourhoods, many of them recently inhabited. The militias were born with a revolutionary platform and a security objective: to defeat the powerful gangs that had completely taken over these territories, often with the complicity of the authorities. Thus, the militias were militarily anti-gang. They started "cleaning" the *barrios* of criminals, "deviants" (rapists, drug dealers) and bullies, a crusade that resulted in very broad social support.

The success rapidly achieved through social cleansing was key to the support they got from local residents and the neighbourhood associations (Juntas de Acción Comunal, see Table 1). The militias defined themselves through their control of territories temporarily abandoned by the gangs and through the appropriation of the security function of the state. "We are a state inside the state", claimed Pablo García, the leader of the project. In fact, the success of the original militias stemmed from three basic sources.

First was their ability to provide security and to be a complement of the state. In other words, they were both in competitive and mutualistic relations with it. Indeed, the extreme levels of corruption of the authorities allowed the militias to link their revolutionary discourse to the concrete anti-criminal motives they operated on. At the same time, in their everyday activities, the militias relied on the state – and on the very celebrated bureaucratic efficacy of Medellín officials. As a militia member used to say, their struggle consisted of “...*military undertakings in the night*” and “...*social work in the day time*.” And, to be efficacious, social work required a state presence.⁽¹⁰⁾ Second was the very high level of support stimulated by the provision of security and its combination with “social work”. The territorial control of the gangs had been so tight and brutal that very broad sectors of the *barrios* saw the presence of the militias as a liberation. Third – and a bit less obvious – was that militia members explicitly encouraged a moral revival, a return to the “decent communitarian values” of the past.⁽¹¹⁾ This motive was also extraordinarily popular and allowed the militias to develop a very broad pedagogic activity focused on quotidian behaviours. They mediated in family conflicts, prevented domestic violence, campaigned against drug consumption and, in general, against any signs of decay, which was identified as something basically alien and external to the “community”.

The experience of the *Milicias del Pueblo* worked as a model for other leftist organizations, which simply took the blueprint and formed their own groups. If, as the saying goes, the best praise is imitation, the *Milicias del Pueblo* were being systematically flattered. At the same time, the knowledge spread that a solution had been found for the territorial domination of gangs, and the demand for security expanded vigorously.

But the expansion – by growth and fission – of the militias had its downsides. First, insofar as growth was also territorial, the different militias started to see each other as rivals, and even potential enemies. Second, they started to lower their recruitment standards, focusing on the military skills of the candidates, so scores of ex-gang members joined them. If at the beginning it was clear “who was who” – at least for those in the *barrio* who had called upon the militias to “clean” their territory – slowly but surely the identification task became more and more difficult, even for the protagonists of the clean-up. Furthermore, the Medellín Cartel made a crucial decision, which its Cali counterpart shied away from: they would challenge the state to force it to reverse its decision to extradite Colombian nationals to the United States. This decision had deep consequences. While in the first half of the 1980s, the Medellín narco-traffickers had backed only extreme-right organizations – they actually created the paramilitary groups – in the second half, they started to boast of their “revolutionary” leanings.⁽¹²⁾ This blurred the militia/criminal dichotomy, as the *Patrón* (Pablo Escobar) started to tolerate and even encourage the activity of the militias in some parts of the city, and to funnel arms and other resources to some of them.

The situation thus changed qualitatively in a very short span of time. The struggle with the gangs had stagnated, and it was not clear who was actually fighting whom. The *barrios*, which had enthusiastically supported the militias because they had expelled the gangs and installed a certain moral order, began to tire of the excesses of the militias, and to rebel against them. Then, in 1991, came the Constitutional Assembly, which drafted a new constitution, explicitly conceived of as a peace pact for all the forces that challenged the state.

10. Incidentally, in Colombia, the associations of neighbours are state-sponsored. Ironically enough, one of the original preoccupations of the architects of the *Juntas* in the 1960s was to guarantee community vigilance against alien elements. So in a very real sense, those members of the *Juntas* that supported the militias were being faithful to the original commitments of their organization.

11. Gutiérrez, Francisco (1998), “¿Ciudadanos en armas?”, in Arocha, Jaime, Fernando Cubides and Myriam Jimeno (compilers), *Las Violencias: Inclusión Creciente*, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas–CES, Bogotá, pages 186–204.

12. Indeed, they maintained their murderous activity against the legal left, yet, at the same time, showed sympathy towards “armed resistance” against the state. See Cañón, Luis (1994), *El Patrón. Vida y Muerte de Pablo Escobar*, Planeta, Bogotá.

III. THE PEACE PROCESS WITH THE MILITIAS, AND ITS FAILURE

THE FIRST MEETINGS between the leadership of the militias and the local authorities took place at the beginning of 1991, and continued until the national government accepted a formal process of negotiations in 1994. In this case, time was on the government's side, but both parties had high stakes in the negotiations. The militias expected to obtain political recognition and some advantages to consolidate their areas of influence. They risked being accused of treason by those who chose not to participate in the negotiations. For the government, it was an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to peace in the face of the failure of their negotiations with Colombia's main guerrilla group, the FARC (see Table 1). It feared, however, that the militias were not suitable political interlocutors, and that they were so divided that in fact there was nobody to speak to. The local government, for its part, acted as a third party, with its own interests, and it sold the process as a unique event in Latin America (which, in fact, it was).

Between February and May 1994, negotiations took place in Santa Helena, near Medellín, with the participation of the *Milicias del Pueblo*, the *Milicias del Valle de Aburrá* (under the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*) and a dissident sector of the latter, the *Milicias Independientes del Valle de Aburrá*. Other militia groups rejected any possibility of negotiation.

The process soon took an unexpected turn: the government's negotiators had to focus on preventing different factions of the militias from entering into a fratricidal extermination war, amid accusations of complicity with the gangs, the authorities, or both. The militia leaders, plagued by suspicions of conspiracy, lacked the technical capacity to negotiate with the state. Even worse, the negotiation process weakened the broad social support for the militias. As soon as they abandoned their military activities, they forfeited the power that allowed them both to control the gangs and to promote their cherished moral order. The increase in the number of homicides of militia members in the *barrios* produced uncertainty among community members, who had not been consulted about the negotiations with government, and the eventual demobilization of the militias.

After six interminable months of bickering, an agreement was arrived at. It was presented publicly on 26 May 1994 in the northeastern area. Its main points were:

- **Social investment by the state** in the *comunas* for improved community infrastructure, coverage of basic health, education and recreation needs, and the creation of "nuclei of civic life".
- **The creation of a security cooperative (Coosercom)**. The government signed a contract agreeing to pay the 358 members of the cooperative between 150,000 and 500,000 pesos monthly and to lend them up to 1,750,000 pesos. The cooperative would have five headquarters and would cover 32 *barrios* in the northeastern and northwestern communes. The operation of Coosercom, to be assessed by the government secretary of the city, was based on the explicit commitment of its members to respect the rights and fundamental freedoms of the community, abstaining from behaviours reserved for the police, and to work jointly with the security services of the state in the prevention of crime.
- **Political privileges**. The agreement did not include political privileges (for example, allotted seats in the municipal council). Everything depended on the initiative of the militias to promote the formation of a political force, or to make agreements with other members of the opposition.

- **Judicial benefits.** This was the most discussed point due to the adaptation difficulties and the issues contained in Law 104 (1993) regarding the situation of the militiamen. Many of them were being prosecuted not for political crimes but for common delinquency. Finally, those members of the militias who were being prosecuted for any crime (political or not) were granted judicial benefits and an end to procedures in return for collaboration with the justice system.

The agreement was plagued with difficulties. The creation of the cooperative placed the militiamen, reinstated to civilian life, in a false position. Their two missions were to control the population and offer information to the police. This automatically turned them into "traitors" according to their ex-comrades, and contributed to a further deterioration in an atmosphere already poisoned by mistrust and mutual accusations. Almost immediately after its creation, the cooperative was stricken by scandal: several of its members committed abuses or were mixed up in criminal activities. In the aftermath of the negotiations, numerous accusations of homicide, threats, blackmail and exile on the part of the members of Coosercom were presented before the Defensoría del Pueblo (the town ombudsman), the Fiscalía (the town prosecutor's office) and the church. How could an organization whose main feature had been its audacity and its lack of checks (aside from those of the neighbourhood communities) become an appendix of the police?

About 47 days after the agreements were signed, an event took place that compromised the development of the whole process. Pablo García, the main leader of the Milicias del Pueblo, was murdered. This was followed by acts of revenge among the diverse factions of the militias. The investigation by the prosecutor's office into finding those responsible for Pablo García's murder culminated in the detention of the boss of the Milicias Independientes del Valle de Aburrá, who was accused of instigating the crime. After Pablo García's death, the killing of militiamen from one faction or another was endless.

The militias also suffered a serious setback with the low number of votes obtained by their candidate for the Medellín town council. As with many others in Colombia, they had great difficulty translating civic recognition into political recognition. For the militias, this was even harder since they were not prepared to coexist with the independent organizations of civil society. For example, the social investment agreed upon with the government, rather than contributing to a recognition of the militias, led to discord with leaders of social organizations. Within their areas of influence, voters chose to support candidates from the traditional parties. The militiamen did not recognize the enormous gap between their imagined constituency, the manual workers, with their complex political culture, and their own rather obscure, revolutionary insider frame of reference.

Relations between Coosercom and the government deteriorated due to difficulties with the implementation of certain judicial privileges. The judiciary reversed some of the benefits that resulted from the peace accord. Conflicts with the army and the police also developed and, by 1995, the failure of the process was evident. The government tried to introduce some corrective action to save it. The cooperative was dissolved in 1996, but in the meantime practically all the militias' leadership had been killed during internal feuding. A similar downsizing took place in the criminal world after the defeat of the Medellín Cartel and the killing of its figurehead, Pablo Escobar, in December 1993. Scattered groups of militias continued operating in some areas.

IV. FROM FRAGMENTATION TO PARAMILITARY UNIFICATION

THE MILITIAS THAT continued to operate were smaller, murkier groupings. The new militias operated at the *barrio* level and maintained some of the basic traditions of the old, pre-peaceaccord organizations. Perhaps the main element of continuity was the quest for legitimation through the construction of a moral order. They vigorously headed cleanliness campaigns in the *barrios*, instructing children and youth to use their free time constructively, and developing cultural activities. There was a more sinister aspect to this effort to guarantee a "clean" community, though. The new militias, like the old ones, were killing or threatening "deviants", i.e. drug consumers, small-time rascals and, in some cases, extending their moralizing enthusiasm to family and sexual behaviours: bad sons (boys who were a nightmare for their mothers), bad parents (especially fathers who behaved as bullies), homosexuals, etc. Once again, some people supported this moral vigilantism. They felt that finally "...the neighbourhood is clean", and "...all of us have to behave well",⁽¹³⁾ and argued that even the mothers of the victims had consented – even applauded – the "executions". In the long run, however, and as the threat of moral discipline expanded, unhappiness with the arbitrariness of the militias grew rapidly.

If this appears to replicate the militia experience of the 1980s, then some basic differences should be underscored. The old militias had much broader social support, and their vigilantism in one way or another relied on some level of social endorsement. The new militias had weaker ties with the population, and were less intent on legitimation by the *barrio* community. But the main difference was their relation to the gangs. The original militias had confronted the gangs militarily, evicting them from their strongholds and, despite their fuzzy relationship with Escobar in his "revolutionary" period, they were seen basically as *bona fide* crime-fighters. But their tragic saga had been made public: almost all had fallen, the majority of them victims of the peace period, but quite a few also killed during the "war" against the gangs. The new militias had learnt from the old ones, and were more focused on survival. Instead of revolutionary phrases and hot-headed military activism, they tried to establish a "communitarian protectorate" centred on social control.⁽¹⁴⁾

But the gangs had changed, as well. Many of them had learnt the very techniques of the militias – illegal activities at night, social work by day – and were vigorously promoting communitarian causes to win the support of the population. They learnt self-discipline and started to impose some basic regulations on criminal activity (you shall not steal in your own *barrio*, etc.). Other groups – opposed to both the gangs and the militias – appeared, but they too seemed to have learned that to maintain territorial control they had to offer security, some kind of self-discipline, and a constructive, communitarian set of activities.

During this period, the municipal government – whether or not in agreement with NGOs and the Church – promoted micro peace pacts that offered latitude to the population and relaxed the grip of the given armed group but which, at the same time, basically maintained – in some way recognized officially – its territorial presence. Some of them were formalized as "coexistence pacts" in the *barrios*, and depended on the mediation of local authorities through the officials in charge of the offices of peace and coexistence. Generally, they involved the exchange of technical assistance and small-scale investment for improved behaviour. As in Tarrow's rendering,⁽¹⁵⁾ they

13. Quoted in Jaramillo, Ceballos and Villa (1998), see reference 8, page 88.

14. See reference 8.

15. See reference 7, Tarrow (2004).

mediated between opposed interests without long-term reconciliation. Thus, despite the de-activation of the Medellín Cartel and the peace process with the old militias, the homicide rates reduced only slightly.

In the meantime, the city was heading towards a reconfiguration of its security map. By the second half of the 1990s, deep changes had taken place within the world of organized crime. Instead of a more or less vertical integration, as in the times of the Medellín Cartel and Pablo Escobar, it was now much more network-like. Illegal activities were structured at two levels, with different orbits of operation – *oficinas*, the big-time criminals, and *chichipatos*, petty thieves and common criminals who frequently committed offences in their own *barrios*. The *oficinas* contracted work, and then hired hitmen, kidnappers, etc. to carry it out. This also facilitated an entente with the militias, focused as they were on combating their direct enemies, the *chichipatos*. Indeed, the *oficinas* started to replace Pablo Escobar in the role of provider of arms, information and contracts to all the illegal groups, political or not, in the city.

The *oficinas* also had their own political contacts. As early as 1993, we find a gang called La Muerte (Death), which kidnapped people and then sold them to the guerrillas; its activities extended to the rural areas in the east of the department.⁽¹⁶⁾ And until 2002 there were still groups (gangs such as El Sánduche, Estrella Roja, La Caseta) that had a very active relationship with the guerrillas, and allegedly were protected by them.⁽¹⁷⁾

The centralization and sustained political networking of the *oficinas* had two consequences. First, one of the underworld's main actors finally emerged as the victor, an ultra-powerful *oficina* called La Terraza, which started to coordinate most of the criminal activity in the city. And second, a new political actor finally took an interest in the city – the paramilitary. Paramilitary groups – funded by narco-traffickers, supported by the army, and welcomed with alacrity by rural notables – thrived in Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s. However, it was only in the late 1990s that they had the interest and the clout to penetrate big cities, especially Medellín and Barrancabermeja. Their interest in Medellín was threefold: first, as a very violent place, it offered a wealth of military resources (trained and skilled people, know-how, weapons, connections with the authorities); second, it had been, since the very beginning, an epicentre of paramilitary activity and support; and third, it is, of course, a strategic site of the utmost importance. Unlike the guerrillas, who were experimenting with models of political mobilization, the paramilitary had a clear-cut strategic plan to take over the city.

The paramilitary advance was based on two types of action. First, they built counter-insurgent strongholds in places where the population had complaints about the militias (and/or the gangs). They overturned the militia's discourse – combating criminality to prevent, not to foster, revolution – and built a brand new one that consisted of popular resistance to criminality and subversion. For example, they justified their presence in the *barrio* Paris de Bello in the northwest of the city on the grounds that “...the citizenship was fed up with delinquency and asking for us to come.”⁽¹⁸⁾ Second, they co-opted the *oficinas* on a massive scale. Their relation with the latter was quite different from the businesslike networks that the guerrillas had established with them. What the paramilitary wanted to do was co-opt them into a general anti-subversive project.⁽¹⁹⁾ At the beginning, they were very successful in doing so, and very soon the paramilitary became the dominant illegal force in the city. The criminal-political coalition was supported by the hegemony of La Terraza within the world of organized crime, and was symbolized by the inclusion of one of the strongmen of the

16. “Muertos seis secuestradores”, *El Colombiano*, 6 September 1993.

17. “Desangre silencioso en los barrios”, *El Colombiano*, 7 February 2002.

18. “ACU aprueba el proyecto urbano en el Valle de Aburra”, *El Colombiano*, 17 June 2002.

19. An argument appealing to both legal and illegal entrepreneurs is that subversive activity is bad for business.

20. Don Berna's criminal career peaked when he became a member of the Galeano clan of the Medellín Cartel. When the Galeano became enemies of Escobar, Berna established his first contacts with the paramilitary.

oficinas, Adolfo Paz – aka Don Berna – to the paramilitary leadership at the national level.⁽²⁰⁾ Don Berna, a very shrewd and rational figure with the technical capacity to adapt the means to an end, simultaneously mobilized tons of illegal goods and created a brand new paramilitary front, the Bloque Cacique Nutibara (BCN), under his command. With the support of the paramilitary, La Terraza and other allied criminal groups were able to eliminate any faction of the underworld that opposed them, a move that also favored the paramilitary, who could claim that they were eliminating undesirable elements. For both strategies – direct implantation in the *barrios* and alliance with criminals – they could count on the passivity of the authorities. In some cases – for example in Comuna 13 where, after a military takeover against the militias, the paramilitary apparently settled – there were serious allegations that something worse than neutral benevolence had taken place.

However, like the militias, the paramilitary soon faced a crisis of expansion. This crisis had three main sources. First, several sectors that supported them – not only a sector of the urban rich, but also shopkeepers, pawnbrokers, etc. – had their own security demands that were at least partially overridden by the alliance with La Terraza and other *oficinas*. So they had reasons for being very unhappy. This forced the paramilitary to take a firmer stance against La Terraza, demanding the interruption of some of its most disruptive criminal activities. But this very rapidly broke the paramilitary–La Terraza alliance and initiated a period of confrontation (that ended with the defeat of La Terraza). Second, the alliance with criminals radically changed the coalitional constellation within the paramilitary themselves. Although the paramilitary in Colombia were created by the narco-traffickers, their stability depended on a fragile compromise between the “political” and the “criminal”. When this was broken, it was inevitable that internecine war should ensue. With the inclusion of Don Berna in the national leadership – together with numerous indications that the criminal element was winning the upper hand within the organization – the balance was broken, and internal strife followed. By 2003, the Bloque Cacique Nutibara headed by Don Berna was ferociously disputing territories with the Bloque Metro, led by Comandante Doble Cero, who protested that narco-trafficking had become too important in the “paramilitary project”.⁽²¹⁾ Third, tensions with actual or potential adversaries were growing: the guerrillas tried a “recapture” in 2003, the municipal authorities were preoccupied with the levels of open paramilitary activity, some neighbourhoods were starting to show discomfort with the new boss, and so on.

21. To avoid any misunderstanding, we must remind the reader that the “politicians” within the paramilitary have been as gruesome killers as the “criminals”.

V. THE LAST PEACE PROCESS

BY THE END of 2002, the government initiated a peace process with the paramilitary, presenting it as a step in the right direction, which would save a lot of lives. The left criticized it, on the grounds that the state had never really combated the illegal right. Be that as it may, this is an ongoing process, highly secretive, so there are still many “black holes” that make any detailed assessment difficult. However, with regard to Medellín, some key variables, relevant to this paper, are fairly well known; at the end of 2003, the Bloque Cacique Nutibara, after a short period of negotiation with the national government, decided to dissolve, give up some of its weapons, and return to legality.

Table 2: Previous participation of the paramilitary <i>reinsertados</i> in armed groups		
	Number	Percentage
FARC	4	0.53
ELN	0	0
Army	71	9.48
Gangs and common criminals	280	37.38
Other paramilitary entities	34	4.54
None	360	48.10
Total	749	100.00

SOURCE: Programa de Paz y Reconciliación, Alcaldía de Medellín, 2004.

Table 2 shows the composition of the BCN as it relates to previous membership of an illegal group. Only a few members came from the guerrillas – in rural paramilitarism, it may be surmised that the percentage is substantially higher – but even so, they played a crucial role: the guerrillas taught the BCN the importance of political discourse and methods of organizations. For example, a commander, Roberto, who operated in the centre east of the city, was formerly an ELN militant. He claims that he joined the paramilitary after learning that the FARC had assassinated his father. Another character, known as Hammer, started as a militia member and then became paramilitary leader in the Barrio Santa Cruz. But the main source of BCN members was the gangs, followed at some distance by members of security agencies. Thirty-seven per cent came from gangs and nearly 10 per cent from the army. The strong link between the BCN and common crime was further underscored by the war it waged against its paramilitary rival, the Bloque Metro. The leader of the BM, known as Rodrigo or Doble Cero, claimed that the paramilitary had “narcotized” and focused exclusively on economic activities; he declined any participation in the peace process, unless the government gave priority to the “politicians” within the paramilitary.⁽²²⁾ Actually, the paramilitary head figure, Carlos Castaño, hinted ambiguously at something similar. In the course of 8–10 months, the Bloque Metro was wiped out and Rodrigo was killed. Carlos Castaño was also probably disposed of.⁽²³⁾

There were several differences between the national and local governments with regard to the peace process. In the 2003 elections, a new mayor was elected, and he and his staff made it clear that the process was being imposed on them. The government secretary publicly requested a truth commission as a prerequisite to any sensible peace agreement with the paramilitary, but the proposal was rapidly shunned by the national peace commissioner. The mayor finally accepted the agreement as a *fait accompli* and has tried to push forward the agreements. But, as in the case of the militias, the promised goods and employment were not forthcoming and the ambiguous status of the BCN members – are they legal or illegal; mass killers or prodigal sons? – remains problematic. Isolated assassinations of BCN members have already taken place.

The prognosis regarding the peace process is not necessarily as bleak as this description may suggest; indeed, any peace process is full of problems that have been declared insurmountable. At the same time, this last experience highlights some common patterns in all the peace experiences

22. “Bloque Metro pide pista”, *El Tiempo*, 4 August 2003, pages 1–2.

23. He was victim of an assassination attempt and “disappeared”. The government did not react to the events.

described in this paper:

- All the actors with whom the authorities negotiated filled a state vacuum, namely the provision of security. Their main source of legitimacy and territorial control was the fight against insecurity.
- None was defeated militarily. Neither the militias nor the “social gangs” of the 1990s, let alone the paramilitary, were severely affected in terms of their basic operational structures. And of the three actors, the only one that in some way or another was defeated politically – in the sense that its members openly admitted that they were tired of waging their war – were the militias.
- All of them mixed political and criminal motives. True, the militias started as an anti-gang force and remained so till the bitter end. At the same time, they became enmeshed in criminal networks, especially when Pablo Escobar decided to challenge the state in his anti-extradition, revolutionary period.
- The national and municipal authorities lacked agreement and coordination regarding the peace processes. Their incentives and orientation were quite different in each particular case. But the fulfillment of the agreements would have required a very tight coordination between the city and the nation. Lack of coordination implied the loss of precious time.
- Last but not least, there was a strong learning process by all actors. The militias offered a political–military blueprint – the protection of the community against the disorder caused by people who steal and rob in their own neighbourhood, drug addicts and rapists, and “deviants” – that was later taken up by actors of the most diverse political hues. This blueprint is extremely effective⁽²⁴⁾ and there are strong incentives to use it. It provides a veneer of legitimacy for illegal activities and offers the authorities fast and practical solutions. This explains why the city is full of similar competing offers of provision of security. The result is a highly guarded, and highly insecure, city.

24. Monkkonen, Eric (1981), “A disorderly people? Urban order in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries”, *The Journal of American History* Vol 68, No 3, pages 539–559.

25. It must be remembered that several other heavyweight narco-traffickers decided that they would not challenge the state in any case.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

THE POLITICIZATION OF crime depended on the decisions of clearly identifiable local agents. Some guerrillas wanted to increase their urban presence, and provided military training. The militias created a model – the penetration of *barrios* with anti-criminal and anti-deviant motives – and were successful. Pablo Escobar and other narco-traffickers supported alternatively left- and right-wing forces; in some cases, they created them.⁽²⁵⁾ Public policies were decided and designed by specific politicians and bureaucrats.

But, aside from agency, other factors and dimensions are necessary to explain Medellín’s peculiarities. Tradition will not work as an explanation: until relatively recently (the late 1940s), the city was considered an oasis of tranquility in a turbulent country. The explanation may be found in the convergence of urban, state and market motives. A huge transnational illegal market triggered high levels of criminal activity. This necessarily, somewhere, would have led to political responses. First, the illegality of the market depends on political decisions, as the expression “war on drugs” underscores; take, for example, the extradition of Colombian nationals, which so heavily influenced Pablo Escobar’s decision to challenge the Colombian state. Second, security is the political problem par excellence, and its provision a definitional feature of the state.

So in the beginning, there was crime? Yes. But only above a certain threshold, which in Medellín was surpassed, does the criminal “heating up”⁽²⁶⁾ of the territory become a central, and directly political, state problem. True, the state did not break down in Medellín; it maintained its bureaucratic efficiency, and still corresponded to what Tilly calls a “generous definition” of the state: “...any organization that command[s] substantial means of coercion and successfully claim[s] durable priority over all other users⁽²⁷⁾ of coercion within at least one clearly bounded territory.”⁽²⁸⁾ But priority does not mean exclusivity; and in the last 20 years, security issues have been the affair of both the state and alternative providers. The latter obtained in the midst of their involved relation with criminality the “...four resources that significantly influence the careers of individual guerrillas: support from local population, physical dexterity and adaptability, interpersonal support networks, and political awareness.”⁽²⁹⁾ But at the same time, they found a new, precious, resource: networking with the state itself. Instead of challenging the state, they maintained with it simultaneous relations of competition, mutualism and parasitism.

Never defeated militarily, sometimes intact politically, these illegal urban armies were re-incorporated by successive waves of pactism. But, as shown in Tarrow’s⁽³⁰⁾ insightful comments, the pacts mediated between opposing interests without offering opportunities for long-term reconciliation and without de-activating the underlying problems. If a useful vantage point for analyzing urban violence is the relation of cities to states and (world) markets – the perspective taken by social historians – then identifying two underlying “big” problems that appear at the fracture line of the local, national and global seems indispensable to an understanding of Medellín’s trajectory:

- **Social exclusion.** Although in Medellín, the most poor are not the most violent, social exclusion is a strong indirect catalyst of urban violence according to its protagonists.⁽³¹⁾ As a militia member of Medellín said, all her life experience had shown her that “...in Colombia you have to be rich or dangerous”⁽³²⁾ and she only had access to the resources – physical prowess and dexterity, and courage – to become dangerous. This may converge with Tarrow’s⁽³³⁾ description of the conditions in states that stimulated pactism in cities: “...states that were at once republican in their structure and oligarchic in their content, governed by unstable and shifting coalitions that excluded the poor, but were easily overwhelmed by an overflow of non-institutional politics into the streets.”⁽³⁴⁾
- **The politicization of crime,** the pre-condition of which, in turn, is a powerful illegal global market. The breakdown in the monopoly of security is not the only issue here. A strong role is played also by the communitarian nostalgic reaction triggered by the disruptive effects of global markets (which are much stronger when they are illegal), as Polanyi⁽³⁵⁾ stressed in his analysis of an earlier phase of globalization. Security and morality provide illegal actors with very powerful sources of legitimacy.

Thus, with all their positive aspects, the peace accords have only reshuffled the security personnel who proliferate in the city. It may be asked whether, with regard to the issue of privatization of security and politicization of crime, Medellín is only an extreme case of a more general tendency.

26. See reference 6.

27. It should read: “providers” or “holders of means of coercion”.

28. Tilly, Charles (1989), “Cities and states in Europe, 1000–1800”, *Theory and Society* Vol 18, No 5, page 572.

29. White, Robert and Terry Falkenberg (1991), “Revolution in the city: on the resources of urban guerrillas”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* Vol 3, No 4, page 107.

30. See reference 7.

31. See reference 8.

32. Salazar, Alonso (1993), “Mujeres de fuego”, Corporación Región, Medellín.

33. See reference 7, page 13.

34. Note that this is not inconsistent with note 2, as we are returning to the national level.

35. Polanyi, Karl (1989), “The great transformation. The political and economic origins of our time”, Beacon Press, Boston Mass.